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Gesellschaft, Berlin.
Marcus Behmer :
[exhibition, October 24th
to November 15th, 1912]

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MARCUS BEHMER

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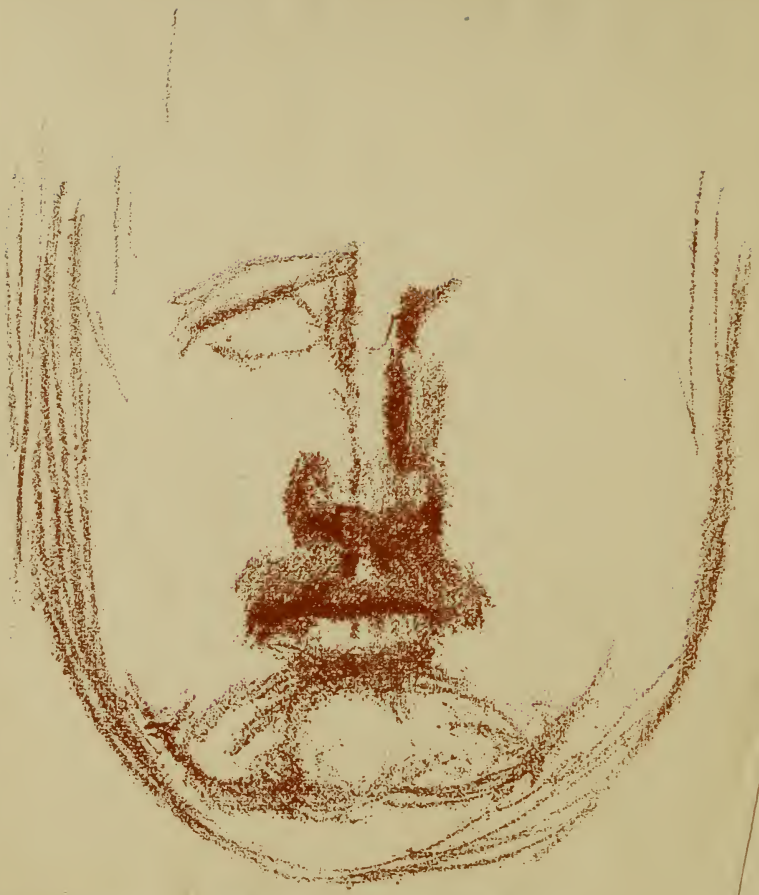
MARTIN BIRNBAUM

NEW YORK
BERLIN PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPANY
305 MADISON AVENUE
1912



Portrait of self by Marcus Behmer

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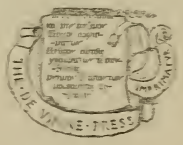

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MARCUS BEHMER

It would be amusing to hear Goethe's estimate of the perplexing and fascinating art of his *fin de siècle* admirer and illustrator, Marcus Behmer, the young Weimar artist whose work strikes perhaps the most characteristic note in recent German book decoration. To the contemporary art critic, Marcotino—as he signs his plates since 1908—certainly offers slight encouragement. One of his best known etchings is the bitterest and at the same time the most amusing satire on men who earn their livelihood by writing about art. The plate is known as "Der gemeine Kunsthistoriker," and is etched in the style of an engraving for a mediæval work on natural history. It is an enormous unmentionable insect browsing and scratching away among musty volumes on Michelangelo, Beardsley, and Titian, while boring through and sucking its sustenance from the hand of the unconscious artist. That there may be no doubt as to its meaning, Behmer added a legend beneath, which, when translated, reads as follows:

"The Vulgar Art-historian (male, strongly magnified). Pierces the flesh of nobler animals

and draws its nourishment therefrom. Southern Europe. Occasionally very troublesome. No perfect exterminator as yet known."

The artist himself, however, is anything but formidable. A tall, portly, genial fellow who will argue with you, humorously but impressively, to prove that his own grotesques are superior to Leonardo's, discuss hybrid butterflies and other entomological specialties with the authority of a scientist, sing clever kindergarten rhymes to his own improvised piano accompaniment until you shake with hysterical laughter, and conclude with an ecstatic eulogy of Aubrey Beardsley.

Behmer's frank admiration for the immortal Englishman, coupled with the fact that he won his first popular success by illustrating the German translation of Wilde's "Salome," has blinded some critics, who seem to think that artists of originality fall full-fledged from heaven. Did not Delacroix copy "La Belle Jardinière," and Rousseau try to make transcriptions of Hobbema and Ruysdael? Beardsley was Marcus Behmer's artistic progenitor, and the work of both men is stamped with affiliated peculiarities, but to describe Behmer as an imitator of Beardsley is as unjust as it would be to call Raphael a feeble Perugino. Compare the

"Atalanta" of the two men, and you will admit that Behmer, so to speak, was graduated from the school of his dead master years ago, but no pupil has ever been as ready as he to acknowledge the debt he owed. There is no scrap of Beardsley's work with which he is not familiar. He studied English mainly for the purpose of understanding the fragmentary literary remains of the English artist. The walls of the modest studio in Charlottenburg, where Behmer lived until he left for his present Florentine home, were plastered with enlargements of photographs of his artistic saint, and the book-shelves contained a complete collection of Beardsleyana.

The other conspicuous ornament in the room was an aquarium which stood on a working-table littered with cocoons and mounted specimens, the sources of inspiration for one side of his art. The strange little works, so full of character and feeling, which remind us of this penchant for natural history, are in themselves a complete refutation of the charge of unoriginality. The natural forms are often fantastically caricatured and converted into little satires on human foibles. He can associate human peculiarities and impressions of nature with the vigor of early devisers of emblems, but in a style all his own. Mosquitos tread on air like

elegant ghostly aristocrats. His mythical bird is the embodiment of sneakish thievery, and the mysterious animal drawing honey from a flower is an engaging diminutive drawing, possessing, like most of his works, an undercurrent of strange ideas behind the ostensible subject. Occasionally Behmer takes a lesson from the Japanese and produces a perfect work of art which is at the same time a faithful and minute copy from nature. The beautiful silk-and-ivory fan decorated with a resting butterfly, and the charming book-plate of Elli von Hofmann, with its drooping orchid, are exquisite examples of work of this kind, to which he now and then turns for relaxation.

As we intimated, Behmer excels in various other artistic fields, and many influences have left their impress on his receptive mind. Although, however, even a cursory examination of his work will reveal the fact that he has studied the works of English graphic artists, the Italians of the Renaissance, his German contemporaries, Attic vases, Florentine woodcuts, and Persian designs, it will soon be clear that all these have now become stimulating rather than directing forces, and that a unique personality here appeals to us, one who has done more than merely assimilate the work of predecessors. To-day he is a master in many

media of what the Germans call "dekorative Grammatik," an artist undisturbed by any moral ambitions. He has worked in France, Germany, and Italy, and his literary sympathies and interests are also very wide. Omar, Balzac, Voltaire, Goethe, Wilde, Poe, and the Arabian Nights are only a few of the names which appeal to him. A single work which perhaps best illustrates his varied tastes and his power to fuse influences is his ambitious "Temptation of Saint Anthony," finished—"Gott sei Dank!"—at Florence on May 12, 1906, in the Villa Gelsomino. Venus, mounted on a huge beast, is almost hidden from view in a crowd of strange men, animals and birdlike demons, among whom Behmer himself, slippered and spectacled and incongruously modern, is recognized hurrying with a bulging portfolio to the shrine. The saint, his hand resting on the rich crop of hair of his nonchalant acolyte, sits gazing with an excusably troubled air at the procession of weird pilgrims, while grasshoppers sing and ladybirds play on trombones for his edification. The picture will surely take its place with the renditions of the same theme from Teniers and Schöngauer to our own Bryson Burroughs.

It is difficult to know where to begin in commenting upon the bulk of Behmer's many

achievements. Initials, tailpieces, arabesques, illustrations, book-plates, grotesque facetious etched plates, satirical caricatures, New-Year cards, book covers, broadsides of old-fashioned wood-cuts, decorative borders for his own literary fragments of no mean order of merit, graceful fans and anniversary announcements —these are some of the things to which he has given his attention. No matter how slight the work may be, his harmonious treatment of surfaces and the rhythmical division of blacks and whites, are marked by notable taste. The print departments of the museums at Hamburg, Frankfort, and Weimar possess the best collections of his work, and the visitor is impressed by his interest in reproductive methods and by a fastidiousness and preciousness which bring joy to the heart of the modern connoisseur. If it were not also characterized by a rare degree of mastery, we should say it is the work of a brilliant amateur, an "autodidakt" whose most serious and agreeable pastimes are the byways of art. He will never tire of work because he plays at it like a dilettant, or rather like a patient fifteenth-century scribe.

Much of Behmer's work is done on a minute scale with the most painstaking care, and among the best of these miniatures are the circular soft-ground etchings, reminding us of

Greek cameos and coins. We know of no graphic work to which his little "Saint George," or the "Saint Anthony of Padua attracting Fish with his Eloquence," can be compared. They are printed, as are his other works, on rare old paper which he is continually in search of, like Ernest Haskell, whose æsthetic technique resembles Behmer's in its uncompromising detail. His portraits, too, strike a peculiar note. Some are in the early Florentine style, and will appeal to those of our own day on whom primitive art seems to exert such a strong fascination. You need never to have seen his young Latin loafers to divine their ardent Southern passions. Akin to these is the remarkable portrait of Alexander Olbricht, another talented etcher of Weimar, whose profile, with its fine deep-set eyes, suggesting a stormy, energetic nature, was etched with caressing, affectionate art. Although there are flat surfaces like those employed by Vallotton, there are no dead spaces. His precision, aristocratic reserve, and a certain hardness, are far cries from the freedom of many of his contemporaries, but his painstaking method does not look labored. He is devoted to book decoration, and has ornamented many of the finest products of the famous Insel Verlag. The initials in these books display an Oriental intricacy and cun-

ning, and the best illustrations, successfully and harmoniously combine what Walter Crane, in his admirable work on Decorative Illustration, has termed the pictorial statement and the decorative statement.

Many noted Continental critics have paid tributes to his art, but the time for a final estimate is not yet ripe, although no account of contemporary German graphic art is complete without some notice of him. He is only thirty-three years old, and is still in a period of ferment and manifold activities. Some of his utterances have a morbidity typical of our generation, which could at any moment become a destructive force, were it not tempered by a quaint, ever-present humor. His æsthetic sense, too, is becoming so sharp and his artistic judgment—inherited from his father, a conservative professor of art at Weimar—seems so well balanced, that an admirer, watching him round out his fame, is tempted to prophesy only the best things.

MARTIN BIRNBAUM.

CATALOGUE

OF AN

EXHIBITION OF DRAWINGS, ETCHINGS AND EX LIBRIS

BY

MARCUS BEHMER

HELD AT THE GALLERIES OF THE

BERLIN PHOTOGRAPHIC COMPANY

NEW YORK

OCTOBER 24TH TO NOVEMBER 15TH INCLUSIVE

1912

CATALOGUE

DRAWINGS

PENCIL, SANGUINE, WATER-COLOR, PEN AND INK

1. Self-portrait.
2. Young Mariner.
3. The Flute.
4. The Grimace.
5. Pan.
6. The Delinquent.
7. A Bird's Head.
8. Sea-horse.
9. The Sneak.
10. The Holy Melon.
11. Early German Ornament.
12. Title-page with Martial Emblems.
13. The Red Bird.
14. Atalanta.
15. Myopotamus Coypu.
16. Giant One-ear (L'Orecchione).
17. Sancta Genovefa.
18. Mass.
19. The Prince of Bretagne.
20. The Lady with the Muff.
21. The Javanese Doll.
22. Forest Play.
23. The Beast with the Long Neck.
24. The Beast with Cast-iron Feet.
25. Kwangsu, Emperor of China.

26. Five Initials for E. A. Poe's Works.
27. High Flight.
28. Temptation of St. Anthony.

DRAWINGS FOR "SALOME"

29. The Moth (Fly-leaf).
30. Title-page.
31. The Orchid (Cover Design).
32. The Young Syrian.
33. Jokanaan.
34. The Wish.
35. The Offering.
36. Herodias.
37. The Dance of the Seven Veils.
38. The Bird of Death.
39. The Accomplishment.
40. Herod.
41. The End.

ETCHINGS

42. Arion.
43. Prometheus.
44. The Picture of the Hunchback (Voltaire's "Zadig").
45. Title-page for Voltaire's "Zadig."
46. New Year's Card, 1909.
47. New Year's Card, 1912.
48. St. Stephan.
49. St. Anthony of Padua.

50. St. George.
51. The Little Bird.
52. The Vulgar Art-historian.
53. The Gentle Art-historian.
54. The Savant.
55. Alexander Olbricht.
56. Ercole Fortunati.
57. Ermenegildo Cotino.
58. Carl H. Reuter.
59. "Callot."
60. Card of Frau Hedwig Deneke.
61. The Greek Vase.
62. The Basilisk.
63. Daucus Carota (Hoffmann's Tales).
64. The Snow-Queen.
65. Salvia Coccinea Splendens.
66. Larva of Grasshopper.
67. Invitation to an Exhibition.
68. La Zanzara.
69. The Hanged.

WOOD-CUTS AND PRINTS

70. The Stolen Orchid.
71. Fate.
72 to 83. Twelve Proofs of Drawings for "Der Insel."
84. The Fisherman.
85. The Beast with Jewelled Knee-pans.
86. Title-page and Fly-leaf for "The Arabian Nights."
87. The Duke.

88. Elli von Hofmann.
89. Konrad Vollert.
90. Dr. Franz Fenchel.
91. Dr. Walter Lindenthal.
92. Erich Wedekind.
93. Günther Werckmeister.
94. Estella Meyer.
95. Fritz Waerndorfer.
96. Paul Marsch.
97. Alexander Olbricht I.
98. Martha Licht.
99. Wilhelm Merton.
100. Polyxeni Hardt.
101. Marcus Behmer. Book-stamp.
102. Marcus Behmer. Book-stamp.
103. Ernst et Marie Levy.
104. R. K.
105. Dr. Heinzmöller.
106. Alexander Olbricht II.
107. Eva Weisbach.
108. Dr. Otto Deneke.
109. Gabriele Reuter.
110. Alice Brendel.
111. Frieda Liermann.
112. Ruth Behmer.
113. Kuno Tiemann.
114. Lydia Wiskovatoff.
115. Various Initials.

116. Fan with Resting Butterfly.
117. Portrait of Marcus Behmer by his brother, Joachim Behmer.

BOOKS DECORATED BY MARCUS BEHMER

Salome, von Oscar Wilde. Insel Verlag. Leipzig, 1903.

Das Mädchen mit den Goldaugen, von Honoré de Balzac. Insel Verlag. Leipzig, 1904.

Ninon von Lenclos, von Ernst Hardt. Insel Verlag. Leipzig, 1905.

Die Erzählungen aus den Tausend und Ein Nächten. Insel Verlag. Leipzig, 1906.

Rubaijat des Omar Chajjam. Insel Verlag. Leipzig, 1907.

"Fuer Milla," von P. W. Privately printed book of verses, 1911.